

BRUSHWORK



POETRY AND TRANSLATIONS BY ERIC SELLAND

The Condition of Music (2000)

Inventions (2007)

Still Lifes (2012)

Arc Tangent (2014)

Beethoven's Dream (2015)

Object States (2018)

TRANSLATIONS

Takagai Hiroya, *Rush Mats* (1999)

Takashi Hiraide, *The Guest Cat* (2014)

Genki Kawamura, *If Cats Disappeared from the World* (2019)

Kiwao Nomura, *The Day Laid Bare* (2020)

Minoru Yoshioka, *Kusudama* (1991 / 2021)

B R U S H

W O R K

Eric Selland

I S O B A R
P R E S S

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INTRODUCTION

Keeping a notebook has always been important to me. Its function exceeds that of a convenient place to jot down the beginnings of a poem or a random journal entry. Over time I became aware of the fact that the notebook contains a record of the poetic process, and process has long been one of my concerns. I began to think of the notebook as the poet's version of the artist's studio – even imagining it as a physical place where one could enter and move around, working with the various tools and materials the artist uses to construct a work. This sense of the notebook as a place becomes quite strong for someone like myself who has moved around a lot, living in different cities and different countries, and not necessarily having a workspace with complete privacy. The notebook itself becomes that space.

In recent years the notebook has become the primary focus of my writing. Part of this comes from a questioning of the concept of the completed work, the 'product,' as being more important than the process – as if writing were merely an inconvenience to be borne as a means of reaching the goal of a finished work, which is then packaged and sold. I share this concern with a number of poets who approach writing as a daily practice. Here there is less emphasis on the final product and more on process. At the same time, however, I realize that I'm moving in two different directions at once: the conceptual or ideal relationship to language and thought in the form of daily writing, and the understanding of language in its materiality, where the written word becomes an object or shape in a visual work.

I have also felt the need to move outside language, to transcend language and the purely intellectual world, and that has led me to visual work in the form of collage, calligraphy, and abstract painting. The notebook is a space that can contain both text and visual elements existing together on the same plane, in communication as it were. It's a kind of notebook art, if you will. I also produce individual paintings and abstract calligraphy, but the notebook is a separate type of work in its own right.

This book is a selection of pages from some of my recent notebooks. Many of the calligraphy pieces are framed in a way that they can stand as individual works, but they are actually part of a whole, often framing, or framed by, text. Some of the pages give a more complete sense of what the notebook looks like and how the calligraphy and the handwritten text live together on the same plane.

I also have a lifelong obsession with quotation (the fragment). I tend to write down quotes as I read. Reading and writing necessarily accompany one another. Some of the calligraphy here is written over (or into) quotations. These quotes are all from texts which have been important to me for much of my life as a poet, and this acts as both critique (or 'intervention') and a means of participating in the writings of thinkers whose work I have returned to over the course of many years.

Brushwork, as the title of this book suggests, focuses especially on the practice of abstract calligraphy¹ which has become a

¹ The only piece in the book using an actual kanji character is 'ryō' 了, which means understanding or enlightenment.

major part of my practice. My exposure to Japanese calligraphy began fairly early in life. Japanese art was all around me as a child as it was an interest of my parents. And it was part of my Japanese language studies in college. Even as I moved more deeply into experimental poetry the central role of the written symbol itself in Japanese (as opposed to western languages which tend to prioritize speech over writing) was highly influential on my poetics. The Japanese language and culture, both traditional and contemporary, have been unavoidable aspects of my life – a ‘marriage,’ if you will, pervading both professional and personal life. Hence it was quite natural that, as I moved more toward the visual in my artistic expression, that earlier experiments in collage, before I began producing the type of works shown here, would soon have me pasting clippings of English words and phrases in a framework produced with a Japanese brush in the shape of a kanji character. This gradually developed into the abstract calligraphy shown here.

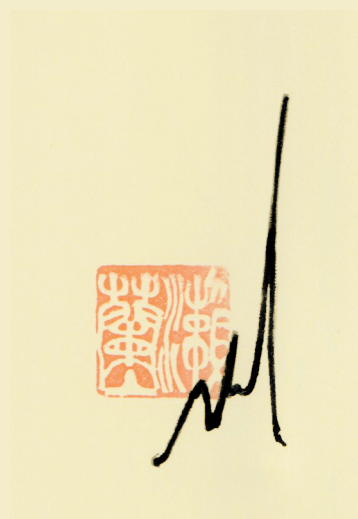
How to hold the brush, apply brush to paper, how to draw a line – the proper way of producing a kanji – all of this had somehow remained with me as I returned to this practice from earlier in life. The memory seemed to be held in the hand rather than the head.

Mark, sign, inscription – the seal pressed deeply into the paper – these are all very archetypal, very ancient forms of human linguistic expression, much older than writing systems themselves. It is this very ancient, gestural, physical expression that I return to in this practice.

The secret to performing these works is the right amount of concentration but without becoming overly self-conscious. Spontaneity is needed, and it is as much a response to the physical impulse to move the hand in a certain way as it is to something in the mind.

And strangely, while this work represents a break with my previous poetic practice, at the same time it seems to have brought me back to my origins. Even the idea of calligraphy that is so stylized it is nearly impossible to read, or even becomes more like an abstract painting, has a precedence in tradition. The eccentric Zen priests of medieval Japan practiced a highly individualized form of calligraphy that is often difficult to read, and there are many practitioners today with a more creative or in some cases even abstract approach. Often, I see this type of calligraphy on Facebook and Instagram, and it is then that I know that I am not alone.

ERIC SELLAND, TOKYO, August 2023









Handwritten signature in black ink, appearing as a stylized, flowing script, located in the bottom right corner of the page.







For many years I have been listening
to your words there through the crack
under the floor. I have learned
from myself. After all, there was
nothing else I could do. It is
nowhere I have learned them by heart
and that it has been a long time,

and that is why I am here. It
is that I am here with a small
box a collection of words. (I am)

A time of words has been called up
by the at last in the world to the
truth, and the truth is that the
has been at last. The world is
very far in the world. It is
a piece of the world. It is
the truth is that the world is
out there, and it is, satisfying
to be at last.

- DOSTOEVSKY
The end of the world


For forty years I have been listening
to your words there through the crack
under the floor. I have invented
them myself, there was
nothing else I could invent. It is
no wonder that I have learned it by heart
and it has taken a literary form.

Now for the story itself. The fact
is that this is neither a narrative
nor a collection of notes.

A train of memories he has called up
bring him at last irresistibly to the
truth, and truth irresistibly ennoble
his heart and mind. Towards the end the
very tone of his narrative becomes
different from its incoherent beginning.
The truth is revealed to the poor man
quite clearly and definitely, sufficiently
for himself to see at least.

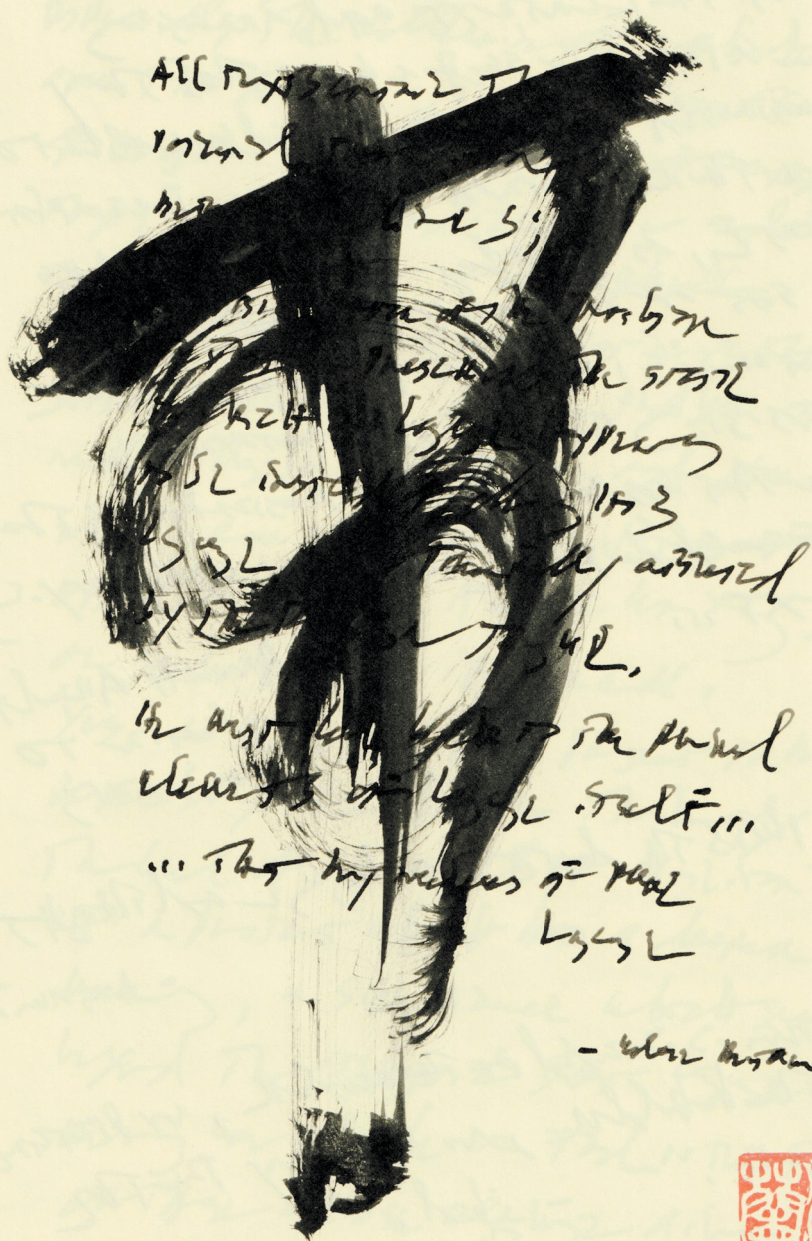
– Fyodor Dostoevsky
From *The Underground Man* and
author's foreword to 'A Meek One'

All texts contain their
potential translation
between the lines;

... the basic error of the translator
is that he preserves the state
in which his own language happens
to be instead of allowing his
language to be powerfully affected
by the foreign tongue.

He must go back to the primal
elements of language itself...
... that very nucleus of pure language

– Walter Benjamin
The Task of the Translator



ALL THESE THINGS

WILL BE DONE

BY THE LORD

AND HE WILL

DO THEM IN HIS OWN

TIME AND IN HIS OWN

WAY AND HE WILL

DO THEM IN HIS OWN

WAY AND HE WILL

DO THEM IN HIS OWN
WAY AND HE WILL
DO THEM IN HIS OWN

WAY AND HE WILL
DO THEM IN HIS OWN
WAY AND HE WILL

- John 1:3



[Handwritten signature]